

By Mark Schoofs

"We decided to expose the rationalizations that gay men are using to have unsafe sex," says art director Patrick O'Neill. He's explaining the AIDS-prevention posters that he and two colleagues from the ad agency Deutsch created pro bono for the New York City Department of Health. "We wanted gay men to see these justifications and talk about them, so that they'd recognize their own thoughts and possibly act more safely."

But gay men might never see the ads, unless the Deutsch team finds the money to print them on its own. Despite the widely reported and potentially catastrophic rise in unsafe sex among gay men, the health department has opted not to produce this campaign.

Why? That depends on who's answering—and the decision makers at the health department are keeping mighty mum. They deflected numerous Voice inquiries to department spokesperson Sam Friedman, who denies the ads have been rejected at all, just passed over for a campaign the department wants to get out by Gay Pride Week.

But the Deutsch team says the campaign's deliberately campy tone—and not the time line—sent the department running scared. According to Deutsch VP and AIDS activist Andrew Beaver, health department brass felt the tone of the ads was "too flip," and that the animation "could be perceived as offensive, because it depicts gay men as a cartoon."

Friedman refuses to confirm or deny, but if this was the reasoning, the department is not alone. The Voice showed the ads to Dave Nimmons, deputy director for education at Gay Men's Health Crisis. While lauding "the idea of looking at gay

men's inner dialogue," Nimmons feels the tone might be too "mocking" to encourage condom use.

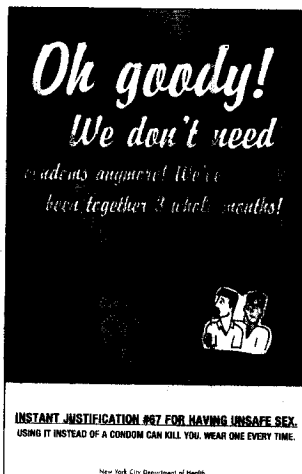
The difference in perceptions may reflect the divide between health educators and advertisers. While Nimmons worries that the ads may be "unsupportive," Beaver is sure they would be "impactful." The Deutsch team included a copywriter for Tanqueray's Mr. Jenkins campaign. Art director O'Neill, who helped create IKEA's gay TV commercial, says the team wanted to "make something that will stand out from the fray of safe-sex messages that all sound similar."

A still deeper divide may be this: how to proceed when no one really knows what safer-sex messages will work. While large institutions tend toward caution, activists and volunteers often don't worry as much about ruffling feathers. Beaver, who in his activist role has lobbied the health department to take the controversial step of regulating sex clubs, believes too much caution is crippling, because it results in "boring, ineffective ads." He also believes that controversy itself can be helpful, because it raises safer-sex awareness.

Indeed, Beaver hopes to produce the ads for a "guerrilla campaign." Before the health department cooled to the ads, the Deutsch team—who stress it was donating its services as individuals, not as part of a corporate effort—had lined up personnel to produce the artwork for free. Now, Beaver is willing to pony up

# TOO HOT TO HANDLE?

## Health Department Nixes Safer-Sex Ad



This rough mock-up is one of a series presented to the city's Department of Health. Designed to expose the inner rationalizations some gay men use to have unsafe sex, the ads include other "instant justifications," such as: "Lucky I had a few drinks. . . . Otherwise I'd be too scared to have unsafe sex with this hot thing!" and "Unsafe sex? Why not! After all, my last HIV test came back negative!"

\$1000 toward printing and distribution, but figures he needs another \$4000.

If he goes ahead without the health department, Beaver wants to make the ads even more provocative. He wants to include explicit definitions of safe and unsafe sex, as well as some of the rationalizations that HIV-positive men use for having unprotected sex. All of the ads produced for the health department target men who are HIV-negative, or who don't know whether they are infected. Journalist Michelangelo Signorile, who participated in an early brainstorming session for the ad campaign, says a rationalization that some positive men report using is: "Gee, he must be positive too, since he didn't ask me to

put on a condom."

If such an ad were produced, it would mark one of the few times that HIV-positive men have been the focus of a safer-sex ad, and it would almost certainly spark controversy far more intense than any disagreement over the ads' tone. The reason? Many AIDS activists fear such a message could incite scapegoating of HIV-positive men as sexually irresponsible, much as Patient Zero did. While mindful of this danger, Beaver,

Signorile, and other activists feel that encouraging HIV-positive men to protect their partners is essential to combating the new prevention crisis.

Meanwhile, the health department says it's working on an alternate campaign, which it hopes to get up by Gay Pride Week. It won't reveal details, but Beaver says he was told it will be a spruced-up version of the department's 1989 "Rubber Up for Safety" campaign.

Research: Michael Miller

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priority for permanent housing would essentially be "rewarding" them for trespassing, Neville explains. Three of the families are in the process of applying for public housing, for which there is a 150,000-person waiting list.

The Paulinos now live in a two-room studio in a city family shelter in Harlem. Mariano and Herminia sleep on two cots pushed together in the living room; their son sleeps on a third. The city is holding most of their possessions—the stereo, the TV—in storage.

The Zapatas refused to move to a shelter and are staying with Vito's brother, Santana, according to the others, in a crack-plagued welfare hotel on the Upper West Side. The Sanchezes moved back in with Manuel's mother after a brief shelter stay. "They said, 'Ohh, it's going to be so nice,'" says Tania Sanchez of the shelter. "I turned on the light and there were hundreds of roaches."

As she talks, Larry, an ebullient two-year-old in a green corduroy vest, rattles the gate to the building's stoop. "He says, 'Mami, let's go to the house,'" Sanchez says. "I tell him we don't live there any more."

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